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ABSTRACT

Use of imaginative literature to inculcate a heightened awareness of stylistic choices can tangibly benefit student writing. One technique that can instill in students some sense of the work of writing as well as the power of stylistic choice and the resonance of English is to provide them with questions to be answered using passages from works being read in class. Students may tabulate such things as nouns versus verbs versus modifiers, length and structure of sentences, metaphors, alliteration, rhythm, pace, and tempo. Cynics might criticize this notion, but must concede that subjecting prose to the kind of close analysis usually reserved for poetry can teach students concepts they previously may have resisted. While this will not produce any new insights into an author's work, the value of the exercise is in the exercise itself. Students have no trouble noticing the contrast in sentence length and structure in the prose of Faulkner and Hemingway. The significance of Hemingway's paratactic rhythms becomes far clearer when they are juxtaposed to Faulkner's crescendoes of clauses. In the short term, an exercise that clearly obliges students to see language in new ways must give them new things to say about words, syntax, and diction. In the long term, becoming aware of the difference that voice, for example, makes in a sentence and in a paragraph should bring a student writer closer to conscious decisions about word and verb tense choices in writing. (A list of questions on style and two passages from Hemingway and Faulkner are included.) (HTH)

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Teaching Style Through Literature

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Even if the political venom could be drawn from the ongoing controversy about the legitimacy of using "literature" as primary content in instruction aimed at "literacy," the debate would continue. Underlying the contending positions are differing theories on how reading and studying any text actually relates to some subsequent act of composition. Is the aim of teaching students to analyse and appreciate literature incompatible with the goal of teaching them how to write cross-curricular argument or exposition? Does literature at the least distract? Assigning "critical" papers to non-specialist or freshman students can prove, most of us have found out, disappointing. To avert disaster, teachers may be lured into providing ready-made and pre-digested interpretative insights for all-but-passive students to more or less ably restate. Yet another scenario, unsatisfactory for many, predicates personal narratives of response that, as some would have it, can prove "inane" and that could at least be faulted by a tactful theorist as markedly low in "level of abstraction" (See Lide).

Resolutely attempting to stay out of the fray, I refuse to engage in speculation as to whether students could better be taught to write by reading something--or even anything--other than those texts we lovingly dub "literary"--or, lesslovingly refer to as "the canon." I do not indeed ask whether they could write better without resort to any intervening text at all. I would like simply to start out where so many of us actually are--teaching that persistently ubiquitous second-semester or third-quarter course in "Literature and Composition." Unquestionably many who teach such courses are unabashedly "in it for the lit"; others, while savoring favorite poems or stories or plays, may feel that any resemblance to a writing course is more or less coincidental.

While pragmatically operating out of the status quo, I am nonetheless convinced that literary study, directed so as to inculcate a heightened awareness of stylistic choices, can tangibly benefit student writing. Through directed assignments in reading, analysing, and writing, students can move through recognition and articulation of the characteristics of a given style, to appreciation of the connection between specific, measureable stylistic qualities and their cumulative effects. Passages from assigned literary works can be subjected to even quantitative

analysis--count the complex sentences; tally the relative frequency of different parts of speech. Such albeit primitive exercises can and do help students see language in newly objective ways. From the raw material of tallies and counts, student-critics go on to reexamine their responses to texts and to make connections between the measureable choices made by writers and the responses provoked in readers.

But why literature? Indeed all texts are fair game. But works of imaginative literature, because their stylistic characteristics are so marked, lend themselves particularly well to stylistic scrutiny. Even the TV-benumbed college student can perceive differences between, not only the poetry of Plath and Frost, but also the prose of Faulkner and Hemingway. Beyond appreciation of how style works--and students actually enjoy demystifying texts through the discoveries they make--comes application--through imitation, and , most entertainingly, parody. By requiring that imitations, respectful or otherwise, be accompanied by explanations of the stylistic as well as propositional qualities emulated, teachers can help students move beyond analysis to synthesis and so to achieve conscious control of their own use of language. The goal is, in my view, that they internalize, not structures or diction, but rather a sense of style as choice, of writing as process.

One technique that can instill in students some sense of the work of writing as well as of the power of stylistic choice and the resonances of English is to provide them with a set of questions to be answered on one, two, or three passages from works being read in class. Students may tabulate. such things as nouns vs. verbs vs. modifiers; or past-tense finite verbs vs. present participles; or Germanic monosyllables vs. words that are learned, long, and Latinate. They also examine the length and structure of sentences, hunt for metaphors, spy out alliteration, assonance, consonance, and grapple with rhythm, pace, and tempo. Students are forced to let go of facile generalizations and really look at and listen to the seams and joints of sentence and paragraph.

Cynics might argue that the idea that such an exercise can lead to a greater consciousness of style smacks of pie-in-the sky; even cynics would perhaps concede, however, that subjecting prose to the kind of close analysis all too often reserved for poetry does serve subsidiary ends. For one thing, students will learn concepts they may previously have resisted. If they are

to find examples of alliteration or parallel structure, they are obliged to learn how to recognize alliteration and parallel structure. Terminology is most emphatically not the point. But by actually grasping how and to what end a writer employs parallelism, students can, I would contend, move at least one step closer to using parallelism effectively themselves. Moving from impressionism to a more tangible approach gives students a methodology for evaluating and revising works of their own composing. This technique has its analogies to that of a football coach who shows films of rival teams in action and meticulously dissects their every play.

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QUESTIONS ON STYLE

The questions that follow should be answered for each passage to be analysed. (See Appendix for two sample passages.)

1. Which part of speech predominates ? (Tabulate nouns, verbs, adjectives; calculate the proportions.)
2. Look at the verbs in the passage: are they predominately action verbs or linking verbs? transitive or intransitive?
3. Look at the nouns: are they concrete or abstract?
4. Consider whether the adjectives are largely attributive or predicate adjectives?
5. In examining the author's diction, consider whether there is a significant number of words that are noticeably "Latinate" in origin, words that are unusual or learned.
6. Tabulate the proportion of monosyllabic, bi-syllabic, and poly-syllabic words in the passage. It is particularly important to look at the percentage of words that are composed of more than two syllables.
7. Are there words or expressions that are markedly colloquial or regional?
8. Is there any variation in the "level" of diction, or does the author stick to a consistent "level of usage"?
9. Is there a significant proportion of words with marked connotative value?
10. What is the average sentence length? Is there a broad range of sentence length or is the range narrow?
11. Comment on sentence structure; tabulate the proportion of complex sentences as compared to simple and compound.
12. Can you find examples of parallel structure? Is parallelism a characteristic of the author's style?
13. Are there qualifications in the passage? Does the writer make use of rhetorical questions?

14. Does the writer make use of inversion, interrupting constructions, or periodic sentences?

15. Is there a pattern of repetition in the passage? Is any of the repetition incremental?

16. Read the passage aloud and consider its aural qualities. Are there instances of alliteration (repeated initial consonant sounds), assonance (repeated internal vowel sounds), consonance (repeated internal or terminal consonant sounds), or rhyme?

17. Can you comment on rhythm and pace in the passage? (You might try scanning lines that seem particularly marked in rhythm.)

18. Can you find figurative language? Are there metaphors or similes in the passage?

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Since the passages studied in any such exercise are necessarily short and all but randomly selected, results, it should probably be interjected here, are necessarily invalid in any scientific sense. I do not expect students to produce startling new insights into Flannery O'Connor or Stephen Crane, Poe or Faulkner or Hemingway. The value of the exercise is in the exercise itself--a principle students understand readily enough when it comes to body-building. Looking closely at language is its own reward, and the students do perceive that they have had a new experience.

In the two passages appended to this discussion, the proportion of nouns-+-personal pronouns is roughly the same--approximately 25% of the total number of words. The percentages of verbs and modifiers (adjectives and adverbs) is "reversed." In the passage from Ernest Hemingway's "Big Two-Hearted River," that is, 17% of the words are verbs and 11% modifiers, whereas in the quotation from William Faulkner's "Delta Autumn," 12% of the words are verbs and almost 16% modifiers. In the Hemingway passage, the nouns are largely and markedly concrete: Nick focuses on the tangible things in the natural surroundings where he takes refuge and seeks a cure from psychic damage inflicted by his war experiences. Even non-literary freshmen reading Hemingway for a first time will notice the repetition that is a hallmark of his style. They can easily go beyond that observation to notice the pattern of repetition, the emphasis on those reassuring

objects, the river and the trees--and the dwelling on the sinister swamp, the word that concludes not only one of the quoted paragraphs but also the story. The noun that most stands out, however, in a passage full of concretes is "adventure," a word denoting a concept rather than a solid thing. In a passage marked by solidity, the abstraction of adventure leaps out at the reader, as does its modifier--repeated twice in the final lines of the paragraph--"tragic." In a passage innocent of figurative language and whose diction is largely Germanic, monosyllabic, and plain, these two words, rich with association, the one Greek in origin, the other Latin call attention to themselves and to the protagonist's dread of the "tragic adventure."

Students have no trouble noticing the contrast in sentence length and structure in Faulkner and in Hemingway. In the passage from "Big Two-Hearted River," for instance, the average sentence is between eleven and twelve words long; the sentences range from four to thirty-six. Only three of Hemingway's twenty sentences are complex--approximately 15%. While there is much to be learned from analysis of Hemingway's syntax (as indeed from a study of his diction), there is, in my view, more pedagogical value in bouncing writers off one another. The significance of Hemingway's paratactic rhythms becomes far clearer when they are juxtaposed to Faulkner's crescendoes of clauses. (No, I don't resort to many Greek terms. For Hemingway's sentences, we generally draw diagrams of box-cars coupled with "ands" and forget the terms. It can be fun, however, to reveal to a student who has discovered a Faulknerian oxymoron (in this case "mute clicking") that yes, Virginia, there is a word.)

Examining the passage taken from Faulkner's "Delta Autumn"--a passage paralleling Hemingway's in that it deals with a man interacting intensely, both mentally and physically, with the wilderness--makes it immediately obvious that we are in a different stylistic landscape. Faulkner's sentences, for example, average 53 words, far more than Hemingway's longest. And the range is more telling: from 13 to 174. Students often volunteer that a Faulkner sentence is the longest they have ever read--and they're probably right. Faulkner's passage is the last section of a paragraph--and there's a story too in paragraph length--and it builds up to a long, rolling finale. Hemingway's rhythms are far more regular, his pace more even, and, like the actions of his protagonist, deliberate.

Exploring Faulkner's diction is itself an adventure--not necessarily tragic. He revels in wonderful Anglo-Saxon words like doom and onslaught that may call up the emotions of some collective unconscious. As did the framers of the Anglican Book of Common Prayer, faced with the task of rendering a Latin liturgy in the vernacular, Faulkner juxtaposes Latin and Germanic in pairs like "ultimate doom"; "oblivion, nothingness"; "dimension, free"; "gladly, humbly"; "joy and pride"; "soundless guns"; "immortal hounds." Whereas Hemingway's nouns were overwhelmingly concrete, the Faulkner passage is liberally sprinkled with abstractions: doom, pride, progress, longevity, fate, span, dimension, nothingness, oblivion. Whereas Hemingway's controlled and deliberate lack of ornamentation admits of no figure of speech (in this particular passage), Faulkner indulges in figurative language. The land personified retreats, is coeval with the man. The animals engaged in the chase are "phoenix-like." Whereas in Faulkner man and nature are mingled, in Hemingway, the separateness of man and land is maintained by means of the short sentences, past-tense finite verbs, and regular shifts in subject: " He did not feel like going into the swamp. He looked down the river. A big cedar slanted all the way across the stream. Beyond that the river went into the stream." Faulkner's Uncle Ike envisions a dimension in which limitations of time and space would be lifted, and his conditional future verb form, "would find," says as much. In the long and rhythmic final sentence the old man of "Delta Autumn," once the boy of "The Bear," looks into a future Elysium where the Mississippi wild-life partakes of the ancient world and like the Grecian urn, is metamorphosed by poetry and so transcends the material. The men that Uncle Ike has loved would then and there be "moving again among the shades of tall unaxed trees and sightless brakes where the wild strong immortal game ran forever before the tireless belling immortal hounds, falling and rising phoenix-like to the soundless guns." This passage from "Delta Autumn" illustrates the importance of having students read prose, as well as poetry, aloud in order to realize the resources of sound the author has utilized. As Faulkner's sentence moves towards conclusion--in contrast to Hemingway's monosyllabic drumbeat--the liquid l-sounds proliferate and work with the present participle form--moving, belling, falling, rising--to convey a sense of the flow of "forever."

The possibilities for dissection seem all but endless, and it is rewarding just to reveal to students something as basic as the existence of two primary linguistic strains in the "word-horde" of English and the poetic possibilities of playing off the Romance and the Germanic. It is fun to set students--

often for the first time--to pouring over the O.E.D.; sometimes they come up with interesting finds. A student of mine working on Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" looked up the histories of that story's two r striking words--the fissure in the facade of the mansion of the Ushers and the tarn in which the house was reflected. The Old Norse origin of tarn can be seen to contribute to its supernatural effect, conjuring up a whole gloomy northern mythology. (Its equally monosyllabic modifier dank is also of Scandinavian etymology.) An even more interesting insight however had to do with fissure, Poe's word for the crack in the doomed domicile of the equally doomed Ushers. A subsidiary meaning of this word (Latin in origin) with which Poe denotes the structural flaw in the decaying manor-house relates to heraldry: in this sense, fisure is a "diminutive of the bend sinister," that bend sinister or band drawn on a coat of arms so as to indicate illegitimacy in the line of descent, a blot on the escutcheon. This discovery added resonance to an already noteworthy and often repeated word, and so a resonance to the student-critic's sense of having mastered the story, and to the paper she was able to write.

And what of writing? In the short term, an exercise that clearly obliges students to see language in new ways must give them new things to say about words, syntax, diction. The "trick" to turning out a paper on style is to connect reader response with the tangible attributes of the language. To do this, a student must be in control of such matters as what substantives are, what modifiers are, what is concrete and what abstract, which verbs are active and which passive. In the long term, becoming aware of the difference voice, for instance, does make in a sentence and in a paragraph should bring a student-writer a little closer to conscious decisions as to when he or she will cast a verb in passive voice and when in active.

Students in freshman classes at Eastern Illinois University have been able to make connections between measureable qualities and quantities in prose passages and the effects they produce. They comment on , for example, the domination of action verbs in passages from Faulkner's "Pantaloon in Black," as opposed to the adjectival emphasis in a passage from Eudora Welty's "A Worn Path" or the preponderance of concrete nouns in excerpts from Hemingway's "Big Two-Hearted River." One student notes the involvement of the reader effected

by Faulkner's succession of verbs, many of which are progressive: ". . . Faulkner gives us the feeling that we are running with Rider. When the dog "overtakes" Rider, it overtakes us also, and our shadows are 'flitting broken and intermittent among the trees . . ." (Allen). Another notes the characterization of Rider as huge and physically powerful: "By using verbs, Faulkner captures " Rider's character and his emotional state; "he is a man who is more apt to use physical actions to express his emotions . . than. . . reasoning or words. . ."(Short). Another student comments on the violence of verbs in the opening paragraph of "Pantaloon in Black," verbs such as "jolt," "thrust," and "flung." She goes on to link the verbs of violent action with the pace; diction works with sentence structure to get "the reader to read with speed, sensing the emotional distress in the process" (Wolf).

Phyllis McCord, in an article published in College English, argues for a more effective use of non-fiction readings in our composition courses. She urges a greater use of theory and rhetoric so that students can "learn a way of reading that enables them to discover signs of the composing process"(747). McCord is concerned that the use of nonfiction "essays" in many of our classrooms is inadequate to this goal, and she advocates what she terms a "literary reading" of non-fiction. I urge also a "rhetorical reading" of fiction--at least some emphasis on specific qualities of style and structure--in order to achieve a working "anti-mimetic" approach to text, a realization that, as McCord observes, quoting Lacan, "It is the world of words that creates the world of things" (Ecrits 65).

APPENDIX

PASSAGES FOR STYLISTIC ANALYSIS

I. . . . He sat smoking and watching the river.

Ahead the river narrowed and went into a swamp. The river became smooth and deep and the swamp looked solid with cedar trees, their trunks close together, their branches solid. It would not be possible to walk through a swamp like that. The branches grew so low. You would have to keep almost level with the ground to move at all. You could not crash through the branches. That must be why the animals that lived in swamps were built the way they were, Nick thought.

He wished he had brought something to read. He felt like reading. He did not feel like going on into the swamp. He looked down the river. A big cedar slanted all the way across the stream. Beyond that the river went into the swamp.

Nick did not want to go in there now. He felt a reaction against deep wading with the water deepening up under his armpits, to hook big trout in places impossible to land them. In the swamp the banks were bare, the big cedars came together overhead, the sun did not come through, except in patches; in the fast deep water, in the half light, the fishing would be tragic. In the swamp fishing was a tragic adventure. Nick did not want it. He did not want to go down the stream any further today.(Richter 467-79)

--Ernest Hemingway
"Big Two-Hearted River"

II. . . . . Because it was his land, although he had never owned a foot of it. He had never wanted to, not even after he saw plain its ultimate doom, watching it retreat year by year before the onslaught of axe and saw man. It belonged to all; they had only to use it well, humbly and with pride. Then suddenly he knew why he had never wanted to own any of it, arrest at least that much of what people called progress, measure his longevity at least against that much of its ultimate fate. It was because there was just exactly enough of it. He seemed to see the two of them—himself and the wilderness—as coevals, his own span as a hunter, a woodsman, not contemporary with his first breath but transmitted to him, assumed by him gladly, humbly, with joy and pride, from that old Major de Spain and that old Sam Fathers who had taught him to hunt, the two spans running out together, not toward oblivion, nothingness, but into a dimension free of both time and space where once more the untreed land warped and wrung to mathematical squares of rank cotton for the frantic old-world people to turn into shells to shoot at one another, would find ample room for both--the names, the faces of the old men he had known and loved and for a little while outlived, moving again among the shades of tall unaxed trees and sightless brakes where the wild strong immortal game ran forever before the tireless baying immortal hounds, falling and rising phoenix-like to the soundless guns.(Richter 319-34)

--William Faulkner
"Delta Autumn"

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